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# State Violence, Learning and the Art of Memory

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the role that memory plays in the learning process of people who have experienced state violence. Our approach to this study has been a critical feminist-anti-racist perspective. Working with a group of women and men who are former political prisoners from Iran living in diaspora, we tried to interrogate questions about the role that memory plays in resistance and community building.

## Prologue

It was a Saturday afternoon in March and men and women were sitting around tables working with small pieces of modelling clay. Artist and illustrator Barbara Reid<sup>i</sup> had shown the men and women techniques for creating images. Initially the room was filled with chatter but after a few minutes, they sat quietly, working on their creations. This workshop was part of a project called *Words, Colour, Movement: Remembering and Learning Through the Arts* and its intention was to introduce former political prisoners from Iran to different modes of expression of resistance against state violence. It started with a single voice, softly singing a song, another voice joined and then another until everyone in the room was singing, spontaneously, one song after another. As people around the table sang, their voices grew louder and stronger. In the collective singing, they began to remember what had been at the root of their resistance, the possibility of a world where oppression was gone and people were free. In the many years that had passed since they first sang the songs, each of them had faced incredible obstacles, but they survived not to forget.

It has been over 16 months since we started holding art workshops. As we reflect back on what has occurred as part of collective remembering of torture, years of solitude in prison, and years of resistance, it became clear that it was moments like these where the collective purpose of the group was affirmed. While engaged in crafting images and telling stories, participants were connected to each other and to a common cause (Brookfield and Holst, 2011:154). Working with former political prisoners from Iran also clarified our thinking about the relationship between state violence, learning, memory and art and as a result the following questions have emerged: What role does memory play in resistance? What role does art play in the recovery process of individuals who have experienced state violence? How do acts of publically and collectively remembering acts of state violence enable people to overcome the trauma? How can community be built or restored in diaspora with groups of people who have experienced state violence?

## Framing the Research

In 1979, the Shah of Iran was deposed through a nationwide revolution. The dictatorial Pahlavi state was replaced by the authoritarian Islamic regime where women, students, workers, national and religious minorities, and any other voice of dissent were suppressed. The Islamic

regime began to systematically imprison and eliminate them. Many of those who survived the prison experience escaped from Iran and applied for refugee status in various countries around the world.

Over the last two decades, many of these former political prisoners have arrived in Canada. Their experience as prisoners is vastly untapped<sup>iii</sup> (For more information about our work, see [www.utoronto.ca/prisonmemoirs](http://www.utoronto.ca/prisonmemoirs)).

Since January 2010, we have been holding regular art workshops for former political prisoners and their supporters. Artists have worked with participants showing them how to use art as a tool for communication and to express their personal and political experiences. An important component of these workshops was a public exhibition of art and a presentation and performance of the created art in June 2010 called *Talking Prison, Creating Art and Making Justice*.

We have used a multi-method approach which has been informed by a critical anti-racist feminist perspective. Using a multi-method approach was essential as we are interrogating issues of memory, trauma and resistance and exploring the individual and collective learning processes of those who are in the process of realigning and rebuilding a sense of community and purpose. We used Feminist Ethnography to frame our research and then engaged in a variety of methods to collect our data. In addition to participant observation, we did informal interviews to better understand individual and group processes, analyzed both written documents and art produced in the workshops and accessed documents that helped to explicate the experience of both former political prisoners from the Middle East and the experience of people forced into migration because of oppressive political structures. We accessed theoretical writing and human rights organization publications, as well as memoirs of people who experienced state violence. We initially focused on reading women's memoirs and soon were able to notice the emergence of two categories of this genre of literature: Memoirs that we felt accurately expressed the experiences of former political prisoners from the Middle East as well as those that exoticized the experiences of imprisoned women. The data that we have collected has functioned to create a cultural group narrative that examines individual and collective experiences as lives in transition from prison to diaspora and the process of remembering as an act of resistance.

### **Contextualizing the Research**

To conduct this research, we have drawn on the rich body of memory literature. We have read extensively across disciplines in order to develop and extend adult education understanding of learning and resistance. In this section we will identify main topics from the literature to explain our case.

In the aftermath of violence, remembering lived experiences can potentially become an act of political resistance (Zur, 1999). There are often severe consequences to this kind of resistance and yet, people are willing to take that risk in the hope that their acts of resistance will decrease the incidence of state violence and contribute to personal and communal healing. The literature points to many examples of the role that memory can play in developing, sustaining and transforming both individuals and communities affected by violence, and the importance of mitigating the effects of trauma in order to increase both personal and political agency. The richest data for examining this phenomenon is the genre of the memoir.

Memoirs written by people who have survived state violence are written for a two main purposes (Wiesel, 2006). The first is to seek personal and communal healing. There are a number of memoirs that concentrate on the atrocity of the Holocaust. Author Ellie Wiesel

discusses his purpose for writing about his experience of Nazi concentration camps and talks about his struggle with whether or not it was because he hoped he would receive personal healing or because he needed to bear witness to atrocities so that their memory will not be erased from human history (2006:vii- viii). In addition to providing healing and an opportunity to bear witness, the literature discusses the second purpose, that is, realigning and rebuilding the community.

The literature examines these memory project in both the context where the violence took place and in diaspora. There are many examples of memory projects that took place where the violence occurred. One case that is theoretically significant to our work is the case of Guatemala (Zur, 1999). Zur documented a memory project where women had the opportunity to share their stories of state violence. Women shared their strategies for creating space and the importance of having others bear witness to the atrocities that they had experienced (Zur, 1999).

Examples of memory projects in diaspora are more limited. However, there is one case which documents the experience of Chilean-Canadians who experienced state violence during Pinochet's regime, had been forced out of the country and then later settled in Vancouver, Canada. They began to meet together after the arrest of Pinochet in 1998 to both discuss their experiences and to determine a way to hold their oppressors responsible for the atrocities they had committed (Espinoza, 2002; 2004). In this memory project, Chilean-Canadians shared the importance of remembering together after many years of silence. The possibility of justice was a key motivating factor in their work together (ibid.). Our research project is an attempt to contribute to this area of memory research which is on realigning and rebuilding community in diaspora.

This memory literature in diaspora is significant to adult educators as it has the potential to help us understand the thought processes, consciousness and ideology of those who have experienced the violence of genocide, colonialism, racism and other forms of oppression. In addition, it can help adult educators understand how to teach, educate, learn, walk in solidarity, support the people who have experienced various forms of violence. Our research shows that those who have witnessed and experienced violence do not receive it passively, they also resist. This constitutes new forms of learning such as survival learning and resistance learning (Mojab and MacDonald, 2008:51).

The literature that we briefly summarized above and the extensive qualitative critical anti-racist feminist ethnographic research that we have undertaken, has pushed us and guided us to articulate and to see the emergence of themes relevant to adult education. As we have begun to analyze data and to reflect on the art workshops, we have seen the emergence of the following themes: *memory as transformation and catalyst for radical learning* and *memory as performance: praxis of resistance*.

### **Memory as transformation and catalyst for radical learning**

Violence has a disruptive function calling into question basic human relationships, breaching attachments, shattering the construction of self, and undermining belief systems, the result of which is trauma (Herman, 1992:51). Therefore in the aftermath of trauma, it is necessary to provide contexts for people who have experienced violence to (re)enter community, to (re)learn how to trust again and how to (re)define purpose.

Much of the literature stops at the importance of people who have experienced violence receiving personal healing. Although this is important, we also see that as people come to a deeper understanding of society and how it is organized, they will comprehend that it is essential

to hold those who have committed violence responsible. Herman talks about the importance of the "survivor mission" in transforming an individual's understanding of themselves and of the world (Herman, 1992:51). As survivors of violence understand how they can become active agents in preventing further injury to others, both their agency and sense of purpose can be restored.

Groups who have experienced violence, both individual and collective, often face many barriers to meeting and working together. In beginning our work, we acknowledged the presence of these barriers and set out to provide a context where people could learn how to work together to forge a common purpose.

As former political prisoners met together and remembered their experiences of both violence and resistance, a transformation took place. As individuals shared particular memories of their prison experience, it acted as a catalyst for others to rethink their own experiences. At times, this validated their own experiences but at other times it confronted their memory of an experience. Participants entered into a self-reflective mode of learning and thinking about their experiences and increased their understanding of their personal histories.. Eventually their analysis branched out into a deeper understanding of the history and cause of their imprisonment. Their awareness moved from self to social where they could locate the social relations at the root of their experience. As a result, they began to see their participation in art workshops as a continuum of their politics, that is, opposing the Islamic regime through the act of testifying against its atrocities. As they continue their artistic creation, they began to ask questions about the significance of their experiences: How did I resist? How did I survive? How did my vision of another world play into my resistance and survival? How does my understanding of the political order help me survive and thrive today? In formulating these questions, memory moments of prison experiences became social explanations.

This social and political awareness also happened as artists facilitated workshops and interacted with the former political prisoners. Brookfield and Holst call this process the "aesthetics of liberation". They suggest that art has a radicalizing and politicizing function (2011:148). They also discuss the importance of art for creating community and building movements of resistance, suggesting that it can both solidify and clarify an emerging moment, in a way that resonates with the members and alerts people outside the movement to the importance of their message (Brookfield and Holst, 2011: 145-153).

We saw this happen through the politicized context of both the art workshops and the performance. Many of the artists had never encountered people who were so politically motivated before. They watched former political prisoners use simple representations to powerfully convey their messages. This pushed the boundary of art for the sake of artistic meaning and representation. As the relationship between the art and consciousness developed, it provided the possibility for larger dissemination of politicized learning. This provided an opportunity for the audience at the performance to gain a deeper understanding about importance of participant's lived experiences and the urgency of collective action to stop systematic executions and imprisonment of political dissidents in Iran.

For all of the reasons mentioned above, memory functioned as a catalyst for the transformation of former political prisoners, artists who facilitated and the audience who bore witness to their experiences through artistic presentation. The concept of transformation is debated and criticized widely in adult education (Newman, 2010). The concept of transformative learning emerged in the 1990s with the important theoretical work of Mezirow. Mezirow discusses the importance of critical reflection as well as circumstances to cause

transformation in individuals or groups (2007). In the case of our research, memory also functioned as a catalyst to cause critical reflection and to take politically motivated women and men into a deeper understanding of how individual experiences relate to the broader social and historical context. Art functioned as a mode of expression and of communication to a broader audience.

### **Memory as performance: praxis of resistance**

The stage was mostly empty. Nine women and men dressed in black with red sashes stood in the middle of the stage. They had just finished the first part of their drama, *Before, During, After: Experiences from Iranian Prison*- explaining to the audience their lives in prison. It was quiet, and out of that silence emerged a single voice- it was a strong voice, unwavering. After the first verse, the rest of the people on the stage joined in. Within a few minutes, everyone in the audience who knew Persian was singing. The room was filled with music and in that moment, it was also filled with possibility.

For our research, the possibility lay in taking individual lived experiences expressed through the mode of art and open them up to a much broader audience. So much of what happens in critical education never goes beyond the walls of whatever constitutes a classroom at that particular time and space (Habermas, 1987: 107; Welton, 1995:145). The literature on memorialization discusses the importance of an audience in bearing witness to experiences of atrocities. Much of the literature discusses the function of memorials to help convey particular messages. This public remembering and proclamation can have a transformative effect on both those sharing their stories and those who are bearing witness to the acts of atrocity. Sharing the experience of violence in a public setting connects those experiences to the continuum of violence as well as the continuum of resistance (Caruth 1995:117).

In the way we have chosen to conduct our research, we have deliberately chosen to push the boundaries of transformative learning. We wanted to push the boundaries of theories that localize transformation and change, focussing on personal or group healing. We acknowledge that there is a place for this type of learning in the field of adult education but in our critical, anti-racist and feminist understanding of learning, we see the act of resistance as praxis where the unity of action and thought compromises a leap forward in productive consciousness. Paula Allman talks about the danger of a praxis that does not take into consideration the totality of social relations. The result of this can be the reproduction of the social order and the absence of any real or lasting change (Allman, 1999: 5-8).

Taking this into consideration, as facilitators, we acknowledged that meeting together, telling stories and creating art, did not go deep enough to constitute change. Participants might have had a good time, formed new relationships and perhaps even received personal healing but it would have stopped short of drawing people in the praxis of resistance (Mayo, 1993). The performance piece was essential to the purpose of the art workshops because it allowed for dissemination and the moment of critical praxis- how other people could come to be participants in this important act of resistance.

The drama, the singing of the song and the other public representations became a living memorialization of political prisoners from Iran. It was a process of remembering and representing and in that process the performance became part of a larger political movement. The performance took the memory work that participants completed and made it bigger than any one person or group. Invoking memory made future resistance possible by drawing people together and reminding them of a purpose that had been obscured through the experience of state

violence. The feedback from the audience was that as they had watched the drama, dance, and listened to the songs of resistance, they felt that they had been invited into a privileged understanding of both the experiences of the atrocities but also the resistance.

## Conclusion

Our research has opened up possibilities for new ways of understanding radicalized learning. Often people who have experienced violence are looked at as having deficits rather than being credited with the agency that allowed them to survive their experience of violence (Horsman, 1999). We began our work with former political prisoners from Iran acknowledging that their stories included a rich history where they were active agents in resistance against oppressive states. We invited participants into critical reflection (Brookfield and Holst, 2011:35-36) of their experiences of violence and they were able to critically look at how their individual experiences were part of a continuum of both state violence and resistance against that violence. As we continue our research and read across memory, memorialisation, and memoirs literature, we will be looking for ways in which our work can contribute further to the emerging body of knowledge in adult education on radical learning and resistance.

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<sup>i</sup> For more information about Barbara Reid's work, see [www.barbarareid.ca](http://www.barbarareid.ca)

<sup>ii</sup> Although there have been a number of memoirs published by former political prisoners from Iran in Persian, there have been very few published in the English language.